

The Mortification of the Flesh

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NATHAN FOSTER and his life-long friend and neighbor, Silas Hollender, sat together side by side upon the line fence that separated their respective domains. They were both whittling away industriously, and there had been a long silence between them. Nathan broke it, saying, "Pears to me like I've had uncommon good luck this year."

Silas paused and carefully scrutinized the stick he was whittling into nothing at all, and then resumed operations on it before he returned: "Well, you have had good luck, there ain't no denyin' that. It pears as though you've been especially blest."

"An' I know I ain't done nothin' to deserve it."

"No, of course not. Don't take no credit to yoreself, Nathan. We don't none of us deserve our blessin's, however we may feel about our crosses; we kin be purty shore o' that."

"Now look," Nathan went on; "my pertar vines was like little trees, an' nary a bug on 'em. An' you had as good a crop o' corn as I've ever seen raised in this part o' Montgomery county."

"Yes, an' I sold it, too, jest before that big drop in the price."

"After givin' away all the turnips you could, you had to feed 'em to the hogs."

"My fruit trees jest had to be propped up, an' I've got enough perveses in my cellar to last two or three winters, even takin' into consideration the drain o' church socials an' o' charity."

"Yore chickens air fat an' sassy, not a sign o' pip among 'em."

"Look at them cows in the fur pasture. Did you ever seen anything to beat 'em fur sleekness?"

"Well, look at the pasture itself; it's most enough to make human bein's envy the critters. You didn't have a drop o' rain on you while you was gettin' yore hay in, did you?"

"Not a drop."

"An' I had a whole lot ruined jest as I was about to rick it."

So, alternately, they went on enumerating Nathan's blessings, until it seemed that there was nothing left for him to desire.

"Silas," he said, solemnly, "sich luck as I'm a-havin' is achilly skeery; it don't seem right."

Silas had a droll humor of his own, and his eyes twinkled as he said: "No, it don't seem right fur a religious man like you, Nathan. Ef you was a hard an' graspin' sinner it 'ud be jest what a body'd expect. You could understand it then; the Lord 'ud jest be makin' you top-heavy, so's yore fall 'ud be the greater."

"I do know but what that's it anyhow. Maybe I'm a-gittin' puffed up over my goods without exactly knowin' it."

"Maybe so, maybe so. Them kind o' feelin's is mighty sneaky comin' on a body. O' course, I ain't seen no signs of it yit in you; but it pears to me you'll have to mortify yore flesh yit to keep from bein' purse-proud."

"Mortify the flesh," repeated Nathan seriously. "O' course, you can't put peas in yore shoes or git any of yore friends to lash you, so you'll have to find some other way o' mortifyin' yore flesh. Well, fur my part, I don't need to look fur none, fur I never had too many blessin's in my life, less'n you'd want to put the children under that head."

Silas shut up his jack-knife with a snap and, laughing, slid down on his side of the fence. In serious silence Nathan Foster watched him go stumping up the path towards his house. "Silas seems to take everything so light in this world," he breathed half aloud. "I wonder how he can do it."

With Nathan, now, it was just the other way. Throughout his eight-and-forty years he had taken

every fact of life with ponderous seriousness. Entirely devoid of humor, he was a firm believer in signs, omens, tokens and judgments. Though the two men had grown up together and been friends from a boyhood spent upon their fathers' adjoining farms, their lives had been two very different stories. Silas, looking on everything cheerily, had married early and was the father of a houseful of children. His wife ruled him with a rod of iron, but he accepted her domination quite as a matter of course and went merrily on his way. He had never been a very successful man, but he had managed to hold the old homestead and feed and clothe his family. This seemed entirely to satisfy him.

On the other hand, to Nathan marriage had always seemed an undertaking fraught with so much danger that he had feared to embark upon it, and although in his younger days his heart had often burned within him when he contemplated some charming damsel, these heart-burnings had gone unknown to anyone but himself until someone else had led the girl to the altar. So he was set down as not a marrying man. He was essentially a cautious man, and through caution and industry his means had grown until from being well-to-do the people of Montgomery county spoke of him as a rich old bachelor. He was a religious man, and with the vision of Dives in his mind his wealth oppressed and frightened him. He gave to his church and gave freely. But he had the instinct for charity without the faculty for it. And he was often held back from good deeds by a modesty which told him that his gifts would be looked upon as "Alms to be seen of men."

As usual, he had taken his friend's bantering words in hard earnest and was turning them over in his mind. When the bell rang, calling him in to supper, he flung the stick which he had been whittling into the middle of the potato patch and stood watching abstractedly where it fell. Then, as if talking to it, he murmured, "Mortification of the flesh," and started moving slowly to the kitchen.

The next morning, when Nathan and Silas met to compare notes, the former began, "I been thinking over what you said last night, Silas, about me mortifyin' my flesh, and it seems to me like a good idee."

Silas looked at him quizzically from beneath bent brows, but Nathan went on, "I wrasseled in prayer last night, and it was shown to me that it wa'n't no more'n right fur me to make some kind o' sacrifice fur the mercies that's been bestowed upon me."

"Well, I do know, Nathan; burnt offerings air a little out now."

"I don't mean nothin' like that; I mean some sacrifice of myself; some—"

His sentence was broken in upon by a shrill voice that called from Silas Hollender's kitchen door: "Si, you'd better be gittin' about yore work in stead o' standin' over there agassin' all the mornin'! I'm shore I don't have no time to stand around."

"All right, Mollie," he called back to his wife, and then, turning to Nathan, he said, "Speakin' of mortifyin' the flesh an' makin' a sacrifice of yoreself, why don't you git married?"

Nathan started.

"Then, you see," Silas continued, "you'd be shore to accomplish both. Fur pure mortification of the flesh, I don't know of nothin' more thorough-goin' or effective than a wife. Also she is a vexation of the spirit. Look at me an' Mis' Hollender, fur instance. Do you think I need a hair shirt when I think I'm gittin' overfed? No, Mis' Hollender keeps me with a meek an' subdued spirit. You rasily ought to marry, Nathan."

"Do you think so?"

"It looks like to me that that 'ud be about as

good a sacrifice as you could make, an' then it's sich a lastin' one."

"I don't believe that you realize what you air a-sayin', Silas. It's a mighty desprit step that you're advisin' me to take."

Again Mrs. Hollender's voice broke in, "Si, air you goin' to git anything done this mornin', or air you goin' to stand there an' hold up that fence fur the rest o' the day?"

"Nathan," said Silas, "kin you stand here an' listen to a voice an' a speech like that an' then ask me ef I realize the despritsness of marriage?"

"It's desprit," said Nathan, pensively, "but who'd you advise me to marry, Silas, ef I did—that is, ef I did make up my mind to marry—an' I don't jest see any other way."

"Oh, I ain't pickin' out wives fur anybody, but it seems to me that you might be doin' a good turn by marryin' the Widder Young. The Lord

strengthened by the reflection that it was about Mrs. Young, not as a widow, but as a wife and a means of grace, that he was concerned, and the memory of what Silas had said about wives in general had put him right with his conscience again.

The widow was a lively, luscious woman who had seen forty busy summers pass. She had been one of the prettiest and most industrious girls of the village, and it had seemed that Nathan, when a young man, had had serious intentions towards her. But his extreme caution had got the better of his inclination, and she had been retired to that limbo where he kept all his secret heart-burnings. She had married a ne'er-do-weel, and until the day of his death, leaving her with two children on her hands, she had had need of all her thrift.

Nathan thought of all these things and a lively



"I JUST THOUGHT I'D DROP IN," SAID NATHAN.

'ud have two special reasons fur blessin' you then; fur you'd be mortifyin' yore flesh an' at the same time a-helpin' the widder an' orphans."

Nathan turned his honest gray eyes upon his friend, but there was a guilty flush upon his sunburned cheek as he said, "That's so." For the

while, he couldn't admit to Silas that he had been thinking hard of the Widow Young even before he had thought of mortifying his flesh with a wife.

Now that he had an added excuse for keeping her in his mind, he was guiltily conscious of trying to cheat himself—of passing off a pleasure for a penance. But his wavering determination was

satisfaction grew up in his mind. He thought of the good his money would do the struggling woman; of the brightness it would bring into her life.

"Well, it's good," he murmured; "I'll be killin' two birds with one stone."

Once decided, it did not take him long to put his plans into execution. But he called Silas over to the fence that evening after he had dressed to pay a visit to the widow.

"Well, Silas," he began, "I've determined to take the step you advised."

"Humph, you made up yore mind quick, Nathan."

Nathan blushed, but said, "I do know as it's any use a-waitin'; ef a thing's to be done, it ought to be done an' got through with."

"I'll have to ask you, now, ef you realize what a desprit step you're a-takin'?"

"I've thought it over prayerfully."

"I don't want nothin' that I said in lightness of mind to influence you. I do know as I take sich things as serious as I ought."

"Well, I own up you did start the idee in my head, but I've thought it all over sence an' made up my mind fur myself, an' I ain't to be turned now. What I want partic'lar to know now is, whether it wouldn't be best to tell Lizzie—I mean the widder—that I want her as a means of mortification."

"Well, no, Nathan, I do know as I would do that jest yit; I don't believe it 'ud be best."

"But ef she don't know, wouldn't it be obtainin' her under false pretenses of she said yes?"

"Not exactly the way I look at it, fur you've got more motives fur marryin' than one."

"What! Explain yoreself, Silas, explain yoreself."

"I mean you want to do her good as well as subdue yore own spirit."

"Oh, yes, that's so."

"Now, no woman wants to know at first that she's a vexation to a man's spirit. It sounds scriptural, but it don't sound nooptial. Now look at me an' Mis' Hollender. I never told her untell we'd been married more'n six months. Fact is, it never occurred to me before. But she didn't believe it then, an' she won't believe it tell this day. She admits that she's my salvation, but not in that way."

Silas chuckled, and his friend chewed a grimace and thought long. Finally he said, "Well, I'll agree not to tell her right away, but ef she consents, I must tell her a week or so after we're married. It'll ease my conscience. Ef I could tell her now, it 'ud be a heap easier in gittin' round to the question. I don't know jest how to do it without."

"Oh, you won't have no trouble in makin' her understand. Matrimony's a subject that women air mighty keen on. They can see that a man's poppin' the question ef he only half tries. You'll git through all right."

Somewhat strengthened, Nathan left his friend and sought the widow's house. He found her stitching merrily away under the light of a coal-oil lamp with a red shade. Even in his trepidation he found secret satisfaction in the red glow that filled the room and glorified the widow's brown hair.

"La, Nathan," said the widow when he was seated, "who'd 'a' expected to see you up here? You've got to be sich a home body that no one don't look to see you outside o' yore own field an' garden."

"I jest thought I'd drop in," said Nathan.

"Well, it's precious kind o' you, I'm shore. I was a-feelin' kind o' lonesome. The children go to bed with the chickens."

For an instant there was a picture in his mind of just such another evening as this, with the children all in bed and the widow sitting across from him or even beside him in another room than this. His heart throbbed, but the picture vanished before his realization of the stern necessity of saying something.

"I jest thought I'd drop in," he said. Then his face reddened as he remembered that he had said that before. But the widow was fully equal to the occasion.

"Well, it does remind me of old times to see you jest droppin' in informal-like, this way. My, how time does fly!"

"It is like old times, ain't it?"

Here they found a common subject, and the talk went on more easily, aided by story and reminiscence. When Nathan began to take account of the time, he found with alarm that two hours had passed without his getting any nearer to his object. From then he attempted to talk of one thing while thinking of another and failed

signally. The conversation wavered, recovered itself, wavered again, and then it fell flat.

Nathan saw that his time had come. He sighed, cleared his throat, and began: "Widder, I been thinkin' a good deal lately, an' I been talkin' some with a friend o' mine. He felt guilty conscious of what that friend had counselled him to keep back. 'I've been greatly prospered in my day; in fact, 'my cup runneth over.'"

"You have been prospered, Nathan."

"Seems ef—seems ef I'd ought to sheer it with somebody, don't it?"

"Well, Nathan, I do know nobody that's more generous in givin' to the pore than you air."

"I don't mean jest exactly that way; I mean—widder, you're the mort— I mean the salvation of my soul. Come, you—would you—do you think you'd keer to sheer my blessin's with me—an' add another one to 'em?"

The Widow Young looked at him in astonishment; then, as she perceived his drift, the tears filled her eyes and she asked, "Do you mean it, Nathan?"

"I wouldn't 'a' spent so much labor on a joke, widder."

"No, it don't seem like you would, Nathan. Well, it's sudden, mighty sudden, but I can't say no."

"Fur these an' all other blessin's make us truly thankful, oh Lord, we ask fur His name's sake—Amen!" said Nathan, devoutly. And he sat another hour with the widow, making plans for the early marriage, on which he insisted.

The marriage took place very soon after the brief wooing was done. But the widow had been settled in Nathan's home over a month before he had even thought of telling her of the real motive of his marriage, and every day from the time it occurred to him it grew harder for him to do.

The charm and comfort of married life had wrapped him about as with a mantle, and he was at peace with the world. From this state his conscience pricked him awake, and on a night when he had been particularly troubled he sought his friend and counsellor with a clouded brow. They sat together in their accustomed place on the fence.

"I'm bothered, Silas," said Nathan.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, there's several things. First off, I ain't never told the widder that she was a mortification, an' next, she ain't. I look around at that old house o' mine that ain't been a home sence mother used to scour the hearth, an' it makes me feel like singin' fur joy. An' I hear them children playin' around me—the're the finest children; that youngest one called me daddy yistiddy—well, I see them playin' around an' my eyes air opened, an' I see that the widder's jest another blessin' added to the rest. It looks to me like I had tried to cheat the Almighty."

With a furtive glance in the direction of his house, Silas took up his pipe and filled it, then between whiffs he said: "Well, now, Nathan, I do know as you've got any cause to feel bothased. You've done yore duty. Ef you've tried to mortify yore flesh an' it refused to mortify, why, that's all you could do, an' I believe the Lord'll take the will fur the deed an' credit you accordingly."

"Maybe so, Silas, maybe so; but I've got to do more o' my duty, I've got to tell her."

He slipped down from the fence.

"Nathan," called his crony, but Nathan hurried away as if afraid to trust time with his will. "That's jest like him," said Silas, "to go an' spoil it all; and he walked down his field-path grumbling to himself."

When the new husband reached the house his courage almost failed him, but he rushed in exclaiming, "Widder, I've got to tell you, you're a mortification of the flesh an' a vexation to the spirit; long may you continue fur the good of my soul."

Then, his duty being done and his conscience quieted, he kissed her and took one of the children on his knee.

The Metamorphosis of Phil Barrett

BY ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE.

PHIL BARRETT read the formal, type-written letter slowly, stupidly, uncomprehendingly. He read it a second time and turned the sheet over to see if anything were written on the back. After which he read the letter yet again.

Then he lay back in bed and gazed dully up at the low white ceiling. Through the open window of his tiny bachelor room on the tenth floor of the Gramercy poured in the never-ending morning hum of the hurrying city, roughly punctuated by the roar of the Third Avenue elevated trains.

The sound vaguely reminded Barrett that he was one of the infinite number of atoms which went to make up New York's rushing workaday life, and that he was already behind time in rising. He looked down again at the letter and sank back on his rumpled pillow.

The colored bellboy who received fifty cents a week for awakening Phil at seven A. M., for turning on his bath, and for bringing up his mail, had aroused him fifteen minutes ago. Barrett could hear the water running into the tub in the adjoining room. The bath must be nearly full. But what matter?

Once again he raised the letter and read it slowly through—this time aloud and with frequent pauses:

"Philip Barrett, Esq., 34 Gramercy Park, New York City.

"Dear Sir: We have the honor to inform you that your aunt, Mrs. Georgia Benton Graves, of this city, died on the 18th inst., leaving property aggregating approximately to six hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars (see inclosed statement). As no testament can be found, and as you are the nearest of kin, this sum legally reverts to you. Kindly honor us with your instructions. We beg to subscribe ourselves," etc. etc.

"That means," sighed Barrett, in a vague ecstasy of contentment, not unmixed with a sort of dazed wonder—"that means I'm rich, or else that I'm crazy. Good Lord! Rich! A thirty-dollar-a-week newspaper reporter and worth six hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars!"

He repeated these last words slowly, solemnly; then lay trying in vain to build, in their proper order, the countless and dazzling materials for air castles which thronged his dizzy brain.

Barrett was one of the twenty-four reporters who hunted down news for the New York Evening Planet. He had joined the staff three years before, on leaving college. Since then his salary had gradually risen from fifteen to thirty dollars a week, while his tastes and disburbing ability had expanded at a far more rapid ratio.

Moreover, there was a girl.

She was the sort of girl one married.

But in New York one cannot marry on thirty dollars a week. And therein lay the chief thorn in Barrett's path.

At last he arose, bathed, dressed, and sallied forth to breakfast—not in his usual scrabbling haste, nor to the Third-Avenue creamery where three rolls and a cup of coffee may be bought

for a dime, but to the New Amsterdam Hotel, where steak, coffee, and fruit cost one dollar and twenty-five cents, including the tip.

What a pity the Girl was spending a month in the West! Still, he could write her all about it. And write he did—voluntarily, hectically—before faring to the office.

"Six hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars," he reflected as he turned his face towards Newspaper Row. "That means about—about twenty-six thousand three hundred and twenty dollars a year at four per cent. We'll marry next month. A year in Europe, and then I'll write that book."

Barrett was due at the office promptly at eight A. M. At nine-thirty he strolled into the big, bare, desk-strewn "City Room" of the Evening Planet, with its overbusy, shirt-sleeved workers and its whirr of ticker and telephone-bell.

Barrett, inured to the scene, usually paid scant heed to it. To-day, however, he seemed to see it all as with new eyes; to regard it as a phase of life whereof he was no longer a part. For he intended, of course, to resign at once.

"Barrett!" snapped a snarling voice from a large desk at the head of the room. Gray, the City Editor, had half risen in his chair and was angrily beckoning Phil.

Now Gray was the one being on earth whom Barrett utterly loathed and despised. The City Editor was a man of tremendous energy, unequalled ability in his particular line of work, and of a disposition, manner, and face that caused dislike at first sight on the part of nearly everyone who chanced to cross his path. He knew all this and was wont to describe himself sarcastically as "the best-hated man in the business."

Gray was a rigid martinet in regard to hours and work, and he had that morning selected Barrett for an especial assignment which should be "covered" at eight-thirty.

"This is a nice time of day for a man to be coming to work," snarled Gray. "I've a good mind to suspend you. Well, as Barrett made no reply, 'what've you got to say?'"

Force of habit sent a chill through the boy and drove an excuse of some sort to his lips. But he recovered himself on the moment, choked back the excuse, and laughed in Gray's face.

"Don't get excited," Phil adjured sneeringly. "You can suspend me till you're black in the face for all I care. If you expect me to join the crowd that cringes whenever you snarl and work your ugly eyebrows like that" (giving a painfully faithful imitation of a certain unfortunate facial peculiarity of the City Editor's), "you'll be disappointed. Got any theatre tickets? No? Well, I can buy all I want."

Turning on his heel before the dumbfounded Gray could reply, Barrett strolled over to the Managing Editor's desk.

"Say, Bennett," he remarked, "you told me yesterday to write a special story about the bicyclists that try to flirt with girls at night on the Boulevard. I had another engagement last night, so I didn't write it. It was a fool assignment anyhow."

The managing editor gazed up in speechless horror.

But Barrett did not wait for reproof. Stepping from the low dais on which were the city and managing editors' desks he walked down the city room towards the outer hall.

In the doorway he met Colonel Bladen, the owner of the paper, who was returning from his morning round of the various departments.

Face to face, in the narrow doorway, Phil Barrett and the proprietor of the New York Evening Planet chanced to meet. It was, naturally, Barrett's place to step back, try to look humbly apologetic, and allow the exalted one to enter.

This was his first impulse, but a brighter idea occurred to him. He noted that he was a trifle nearer the threshold than was his vis-a-vis; so, hat on head, cigar in mouth, he pressed on, forcing the proprietor to step back. As he passed by, brushing shoulders with that outraged dignitary, Barrett, without removing hat or cigar, nodded condescendingly and continued on his way.

"Those three interviews alone were worth the price of admission," he murmured gleefully as he boarded an elevator and descended towards the cashier's office.

An idea had shaped itself in the boy's brain. Whenever any reporter on the Evening Planet receives a raise of salary it is the unwritten law of the office that he shall "set up" drinks for the rest of the staff in the grimy little cafe directly opposite the Planet Building. The drinks in question are invariably either beer or whisky, usually the latter. Barrett decided that nothing short of champagne would meet the present exigencies and serve as a proper form of farewell.

But he had only two dollars in his pocket. He remembered, however, that he had about one hundred dollars in bank, and he resolved to get a check cashed for the whole sum in order to defray the bills for wine and other projected expenses of the day. What was one hundred dollars out of six hundred and fifty-eight thousand dollars?

At the "pay window" opening into the cashier's cage-of-fowls he asked:

"Can you cash my check for one hundred dollars?"

The cashier, who had had experience with the decidedly eccentric financial methods and status of newspaper men, demurred.

"Maybe you think I haven't that much cash in bank?" suggested Barrett hotly. "Perhaps this may convince you," and he tossed across the window shelf the letter he had that morning received from the Denver lawyers.

The cashier's face changed perceptibly as he read it, and Barrett's good taste smote him at thought of the vulgar ostentation he had just displayed.

As the cashier finished the note a man entered the caged room from the rear. It was the proprietor. The cashier retreated to where Colonel Bladen had paused to glower at Barrett and handed him the note. Cashier and proprietor read it together, then talked a moment in whispers.

At last Bladen came forward and stretched out his hand to Phil through the narrow window.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Barrett," he said pompously but cordially. "You are indeed fortunate. Mr. Banks,"—to the cashier—"kindly

cash Mr. Barrett's check. Mr. Barrett, I hope this good fortune of yours will not deprive us of your valuable services. After so busy a life, idleness will hang heavy on your hands. It seems a pity, moreover, that so promising a career—"

"I have about decided," interrupted Phil, "to give up this drudging and devote myself to regular literary work. Nine hours a day for \$30 a week doesn't strike me as an ideal life."

"But perhaps—well, I must talk to you of this later on. Perhaps I can formulate some suggestion that you might agree to. Are you going up to the city room? Wait a moment and I will go with you."

Thus it was that Gray, having recovered from the shock of his interview with Phil, and having marked down the latter for swift punishment, beheld with amaze the spectacle of the delinquent walking into the city room a few moments later talking on apparently equal and even confidential terms with the proprietor himself, the latter's hand resting in fatherly fashion on Barrett's shoulder.

An overpowered thirst, a throbbing headache, and a feverish restlessness gripped Phil Barrett next morning, even in his dreams, and dragged him to pain-racked wakefulness. The morning was cold and rainy, its damp chill adding to the boy's general physical misery.

His first waking thought was of his new-found wealth; his second, a memory of yesterday's episode.

It had seemed, at the time, a splendid thing to buy champagne for everybody in sight, to ignore Gray's proffered hand, to be congratulated, to be applauded to the skies for his daring language towards the city editor, Bennett, and the proprietor; to feel the silent, earnest hand-grip of the friends he loved, to listen with contemptuous amusement to requests for loans from men with whom he had never before exchanged fifty words.

But this morning the memory was not sweet. He felt that he had boasted of his wealth, that he had presumed on its power in a way little short of cowardly, that he had drunk altogether too much, and that he had, in short, behaved like a cad. He was glad he had "gotten back" at Gray, but none of his other exploits now struck him as particularly glorious.

He disgusted he would be.